

Labor's makeover must start with the heart

Drawing on the ideas of a Berkeley professor, LERC Director Bob Bussel wants labor to shift the terms of the debate by getting re-grounded in union values.

What is the purpose of a union? Is it a 3 percent raise? Holding on to fringe benefits?

Bob Bussel, director of the Labor Education and Research Center (LERC) of University of Oregon, is convinced that unions have a higher purpose, an underlying moral mission that's too seldom talked about.

Bussel and fellow labor educator Greg Schneider have begun teaching workshops to labor leaders about how unions communicate — or fail to communicate — what they're really about. The two draw on the ideas of George Lakoff, a professor of cognitive science and linguistics at the University of California, Berkeley.

Lakoff, a leading figure in the field of linguistics, has recently become known as a political thinker, authoring books like *Don't Think of an Elephant: Know Your Values and Frame the Debate*, and *Moral Politics: What Conservatives Know That Liberals Don't*. In the books, Lakoff proposes that everyone has within them conflicting sets of values. Persuaders succeed when their message connects to a set of values people already have — and reinforces those values against other, competing values.

America's conservatives, Lakoff says, are used to speaking in moral terms. But progressives are uncomfortable and out of practice with it, and tend to talk facts or try to sell plans and proposals.

"The right has done a good job presenting a set of values that appeal to people," Schneider said.

But union values *also* reverberate in

the community, Schneider says; they're just not being communicated effectively, or at all.

"People share our values, but they don't know what our values are," Schneider said. "They perceive us as the bosses portray us — irrelevant to today, organizations that are going to force you to do things you don't want to do ... or protect bad workers."

At their workshops, Bussel and Schneider ask participants to identify what "union values" are. They tend to come up with the same handful of themes: dignity, fairness, unity, security, citizenship, equality, democracy and pride.

Then participants take a look at union communications — ads, picket signs, newsletters. And the values are nowhere to be found. Instead, Bussel says, unionists tend to talk in outdated and jargon-heavy language, long on legal terms and short on moral appeal.

"We're setting ourselves up for failure by some of the ways we talk about ourselves," said Cherry Harris, a community organizer with Operating Engineers Local 701.

Bussel and Schneider were invited to present their workshop at Local 701's Gladstone union hall, because union leaders saw they were having a hard time explaining issues that matter to building trades unions.

As part of a campaign to make sure

If you look hard enough, you'll find it — your union's moral purposes. They're seldom talked about, but are often articulated in detail in the preamble or mission statement in the union constitution. Most were written 70 to 100 years ago. Some of the language could stand to be updated, but are any of the purposes irrelevant? Here are some excerpts from the constitutions of four unions:

Amalgamated Transit Union (ATU)

- To secure and defend our rights.
- Establish order and harmony.
- Promote the general cause of humanity and brotherly love.
- Secure the blessings of friendship, equality and truth.

American Federation of State, County & Municipal Employees (AFSCME)

- To work with our brothers and sisters in other lands towards the improvement of the conditions of life and work in all countries, towards the diminution of international tensions and a reduction in the use of armed force to resolve disputes and towards genuine fraternity of all workers.
- One of the fundamental tenets of democratic government is the consent of the governed. Unions are an exten-

sion of that idea. Union members are both workers and citizens. Collective bargaining is the expression of citizenship in employment.

- Amidst unparalleled abundance, there should be no want. Surrounded by agricultural surpluses ... there should be no hunger. With advanced science and medical research, sickness should not go untreated. A country that voyages into outer space can provide adequate education, protection and family preservation for all its children.

International Association of Machinists (IAM)

- [To labor through united action to promote] the right of those who toil to enjoy to the full extent the wealth created by their labor.
- To perpetuate our Association on the basis of solidarity and justice.
- To endeavor to bring about a higher standard of living among the toiling masses.

International Union of Operating Engineers (IUOE)

- To promote the health, welfare and safety of members and families.
- The betterment of general economic and social conditions in the world.
- To protect and strengthen our democratic institutions.

decent employers don't compete at a disadvantage for taxpayer-funded construction contracts, Local 701 joined a multi-issue community coalition called the Metropolitan Alliance for Common Good (MACG).

"Being in MACG forces you to talk about unions with people who don't un-

derstand them," Harris said. "Sometimes I'm faced with trying to educate an entire community about what unions are all about. You have to put it in moral terms."

Lakoff agrees, and says it's vital that organized labor reconnect with the community, becoming part of a broader

social justice movement. Union leaders have asked his advice, Lakoff told the NW Labor Press, but haven't always liked his answer: They can't go it alone.

"Labor has to be seen as part of the community," Lakoff said. "Unless unions have the support of their communities, they're not going to make it."

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